

ISSUE BRIEF

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68th Terrorist Plot Calls for Major Counterterrorism Reforms

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On the evening of May 3, two men armed with rifles attacked the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest in Garland, Texas. While both shooters were killed before they could get inside the exhibit, this attack is the 68th Islamist terrorist plot or attack against the U.S. since 9/11. This incident has raised significant questions about the way terrorists are being recruited in the U.S. and what the U.S. can do to stop them. With Congress set to debate portions of the Patriot Act, it should consider how it can provide intelligence and law enforcement officials with the tools they need to find and stop terrorists, while respecting individual liberty and privacy.

Attack in Texas

While the FBI has not completed its investigation of the incident, FBI Director James Comey provided details to reporters last week and the Garland police have provided updated information as well. The first shooter, Elton Simpson, had been watched by the FBI since 2006 when it appeared that he was going to travel overseas to join al-Shabaab, a terrorist group that is based in Somalia and affiliated with al-Qaeda.¹ While his travel plans were thwarted, he was only convicted of lying to federal officials and received three years probation in 2011. The FBI

stopped monitoring him in 2014 but reopened their investigation in March after he expressed interest in jihad and the self-styled Islamic State (ISIS) on social media.²

Hours before the attack, the FBI sent a bulletin to Garland Police to notify them of Simpson, but they had no definitive information that he was headed from Phoenix to the event much less that he was set to attack it. So far, little is officially known about the other shooter. According to the Garland Police, he was Nadir Soofi, Simpson's roommate.³

Arriving at the art contest in Garland, Simpson and Soofi opened fire with rifles, wounding one unarmed security officer in the leg.⁴ The first officer to confront the shooters wounded both before other members of the Garland police department returned fire, killing the shooters. ISIS reportedly claimed credit following the attack and also claimed that it has "71 trained soldiers in 15 different states ready at our word to attack."⁵

While the investigation will uncover more specifics, there is sufficient detail available to declare this a terrorist plot: Simpson had expressed interest in jihad and proceeded to attack an event that he viewed as contrary to his faith. The investigation may provide us more insight into Simpsons' connection and communication with ISIS, how this target was chosen, and how Soofi became radicalized, but for now many of these details are unknown or unconfirmed by law enforcement.

Implications of the Attack

This 68th Islamist terrorist plot or attack is the 57th homegrown terrorist attack or plot and the 10th targeting a mass gathering, the third most

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common target. The attack also comes as part of a recent wave of attacks and plots, as this is the sixth Islamist terrorist plot or attack in 2015. All of the plots and attacks this year have been perpetrated by individuals who claim to support the Islamic State to varying degrees. The FBI has stated that Simpson wanted to commit jihad with ISIS, and press reports indicate that he may have been in secret communications with ISIS members.⁶

Regardless, with these attacks and the increasing numbers of individuals in the U.S. seeking to support or join ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, the U.S. is currently facing what is arguably the most concentrated period of terrorist activity in the homeland since 9/11. Director James Comey of the FBI has recently warned that “hundreds, maybe thousands” of individuals across the U.S. are being directly solicited by ISIS and urged to attack. Other senior officials, including Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, and the director of the National Counterterrorism Center Nicholas Rasmussen have also noted the increasing threat of terrorism here at home.⁷

Strengthening the Counterterrorism Enterprise

In light of these warnings, the U.S. cannot be passive. Heritage has recommended numerous counterterrorism policies for Congress to address, including:

- **Streamlining U.S. fusion centers.** Congress should limit fusion centers to the approximately 30 areas with the greatest level of risk as identified by the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). Some exceptions might exist, such as certain fusion centers that are leading cybersecurity or other important topical efforts. The remaining centers should then be fully funded and resourced by UASI.
- **Pushing the FBI toward being more effectively driven by intelligence.** While the FBI has made high-level changes to its mission and organizational structure, the bureau is still working to integrate intelligence and law enforcement activities. This will require overcoming cultural barriers and providing FBI intelligence personnel with resources, opportunities, and the stature they need to become a more effective and integral part of the FBI.
- **Ensuring that the FBI shares information more readily and regularly with state and local law enforcement and treats state and local partners as critical actors in the fight against terrorism.** State, local, and private-sector partners must send and receive timely information from the FBI. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should play a role in

1. Evan Perez, Pamela Brown, and Jim Sciutto, “Texas Attacker Had Private Conversations with Known Terrorists,” CNN, May 7, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/07/politics/fbi-warning-elon-simpson-cartoon-event-attack/index.html> (accessed May 14, 2015).

2. Pete Williams, “FBI Alerted Garland Police About Elton Simpson Hours Before Shooting,” NBC News, May 7, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fbi-says-it-alerted-garland-police-about-elon-simpson-n355526> (accessed May 14, 2015).

3. Press Conference, Garland Police Department, May 11, 2015, <http://www.garlandtx.gov/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=24125> (accessed May 14, 2015).

4. Scott Shane, “FBI Says It Sent Warning on One Gunman in Attack at Texas Gathering,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/08/us/fbi-says-it-warned-of-gunman-in-garland-texas-attack.html?_r=0 (accessed May 14, 2015).

5. Eyder Peralta, “ISIS Claims Credit for Shooting in Garland, Texas,” National Public Radio, May 5, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/05/05/404374339/isis-claims-credit-for-shooting-in-garland-texas> (accessed May 14, 2015), and Sasha Goldstein and Jason Silverstein, “ISIS Threatens Controversial Blogger Pamela Geller in Message Boasting of ‘71 Trained Soldiers in 15 Different States,’” *New York Daily News*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/isis-threatens-pamela-geller-claims-militants-article-1.2211913> (accessed May 14, 2015).

6. Perez, Brown, and Sciutto, “Texas Attacker Had Private Conversations.”

7. Elise Viebeck, “DHS Secretary: Lone Wolf Attackers Could ‘Strike at Any Moment,’” *The Hill*, May 10, 2015, <http://thehill.com/homenews/sunday-talk-shows/241562-dhs-secretary-lone-wolf-attackers-could-strike-at-any-moment> (accessed May 13, 2015); James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 26, 2015, http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf (accessed May 13, 2015); and Nicholas Rasmussen, “Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 12, 2015, http://www.nctc.gov/docs/Current_Terrorist_Threat_to_the_United_States.pdf (accessed May 13, 2015).

supporting these partners' efforts by acting as a source or conduit for information to partners and coordinating information sharing between the FBI and its partners.

- **Designating an office in DHS to coordinate countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts.** CVE efforts are spread across all levels of government and society. DHS is uniquely situated to lead the federal government's efforts to empower local partners. Currently, DHS's CVE working group coordinates efforts across DHS components, but a more substantial office will be necessary to manage this broader task.
- **Supporting state, local, and civil society partners.** Congress and the Administration should not lose sight of the fact that all of the federal government's efforts must be focused on empowering local partners. The federal government is not the tip of the spear for CVE efforts; it exists to support local partners who are in the best position to recognize and counter radicalization in their own communities.

- **Maintaining essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. Legitimate government surveillance programs are also a vital component of U.S. national security and should be allowed to continue. The need for effective counterterrorism operations, however, does not relieve the government of its obligation to follow the law and respect individual privacy and liberty. In the American system, the government must do both equally well.

Ensuring Security

In the midst of this surge in terrorist activity, the U.S. must recommit itself to counterterrorism efforts. Improving intelligence tools, information sharing with state and local law enforcement, and local civil society outreach to counter radicalization should be a priority for Congress.

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